



United States Mission to the OSCE

National Minorities

**Statement by Assistant Secretary Lorne W. Craner
U.S. Delegation to the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
October 15, 2003**

The annotated agenda of this meeting begins with the following: "It has become more apparent in the OSCE region in the last few years that seeking the solution of problems relating to specific needs of national minorities is not just in the interest of the minorities themselves, but just as much in the interest of the States in which they live, and of the OSCE region as a whole." My delegation subscribes to this point. Not only should this issue be highlighted, it should also be expanded.

All participating States should have an interest in the situation of minorities throughout the OSCE area, rather than focusing solely on minorities of common ethnicity in neighboring countries. We note the High Commissioner on National Minorities' concern that some participating States have passed laws extending special economic privileges, parliamentary representation and even the possibility of citizenship to certain ethnic groups in neighboring States, and welcome his continued active engagement on this issue.

Overall, there has been improvement in the implementation of commitments to ensure the rights of persons belonging to national minorities have been protected, but much work remains to be done.

In Southeast Europe, we have worked closely with authorities in the regional and the international community to help the countries of the region move beyond the problems of the past. Ethnic reconciliation and the protection of minority rights are important for long-term stability and integration into Europe, and we continue to work hard to encourage progress on this issue. Last year, for the first time since the conflict, minority returns to Kosovo exceeded minority departures. The number of minority returns so far this year is 22 percent higher than the number of returns by the same time last year. We welcomed the July statement of 11 Kosovo political leaders encouraging the return of non-ethnic Albanians.

Challenges remain, however. Recent incidences of violence, including the fatal shooting of two youths in Kosovo on August 13, raise concerns. A recent OSCE/UNHCR report concluded that positive changes in Kosovo "are not yet fundamental enough to conclude that conditions would exist for the large-scale return of ethnic minorities in the near future, underscoring the continuing need for international protection for members of ethnic communities, in particular Kosovo Serbs, Roma, Ashkaelia and Egyptians."

Freedom of movement for ethnic minorities, together with aggressive investigation of suspected hate crimes (including the destruction of religious patrimony sites) are important elements of efforts to create a democratic, multi-ethnic Kosovo in which minority rights are fully respected and minorities are integrated into all aspects of Kosovo society.

Last year, the U.S. Delegation to the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting raised its concerns regarding Croatia, encouraging that country to pass legislation facilitating the protection and integration of the Serb and other minority populations in that country. Croatia did pass a Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities in December 2002. We welcome the passage of this law and encourage Croatian authorities to work toward the further implementation of its provisions. However, the government has not begun to implement a tenancy rights program it announced in June 2003 and it is unlikely to achieve its own property return and reconstruction deadlines, for the second time. Given dwindling international resources to support refugee returns, continued OSCE monitoring and pressure on the government is critical for further action.

We are interested in hearing from our colleagues and NGO partners what ideas they may have on how the OSCE could strengthen its commitments and actions to protect national minorities. We must all remember that national minorities are not only citizens in need of protection, but also citizens who can actively contribute to the building of democratic societies and free-market economies. We must welcome them as full partners in our collective future.